

Gender Discrimination and Segregation in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*

ANAM JABEEN

Abstract. Feminism is an array of political movements, ideologies and social movements that share a common goal—to define, establish and achieve political, economic, personal and social rights for women. Even though, the feminist around the globe lauding their success in ample part of the world is undermining the half of our humanity. Despite many successes of women all over the world to defend and protect their existence, a number of issues of violence, gender discrimination and marginalisation still exist in almost all aspects of life ranging from cultural, political to economic and specially religious and domestic domain. Obscurity to the literary world was one of the consequences of the hostility of the Afghan women within its political boundary.

Keywords : Gender discrimination; segregation; feminism; Afghan women; patriarchy.

Feminism is an awareness of patriarchal control, exploitation and oppression at the material and ideological levels of women's labour, fertility and sexuality, in the family, at the place of work and society in general and conscious action by women and men to transform the present situation.
(Bhasin and Khan 1999 : 42)

Man and woman are complementary to each other. This concept permits the shortcomings of one sex to be compensated for by the strength of the other. Just as two different types of fruit will differ in colour, taste, shape and texture, without one being superior or inferior to the other, so, also men and women have different qualities which distinguish them without there being any question of superiority or inferiority. They are endowed by nature with different capacities so that they play their respective roles in life with greater ease and effectiveness. However, with respect to innate talents all individuals, be they men or women, differ from one another. Yet their need for each other is equal. One is not more important or less important than the other. Each is indispensable to the other. The achievement of equality between men and women has progressed from what they traditionally were in the past. Women were treated unequally but nowadays in the most part of the world equality has been achieved. Many women take control over their lives and have power to do whatever they want in their society, something that was impossible to do many years ago. But the irony with the women is that they achieve

what they wish to, still they are suffering from many kinds of violence – sexual, psychological and physical. against them. A number of issues of violence. gender discrimination and segregation still exist in all aspects of life, ranging from cultural, political to economic and specially religious compass. Concerning gender discrimination many writers like Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherji, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Virginia Woolf, Alice Walker, Khaled Hosseini etc. have contributed a lot to the world of women literature. *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hossieini is one of those literary works about women's lives in a patriarchal society.

Khaled Hosseini, an American, Afghan writer and physician is the author of *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. It has been translated into many languages and has become, best seller in many countries. It shows its capacity to inspire women to stand and fight against discrimination they often face. He crafts the story of women's life in Afghanistan and also how women behave towards it. The persistent condition of violence and conflict has left Afghanistan as one of the poorest countries in the world. Specially after the Taliban rise to power women and girls were systematically discriminated against and marginalised and their given rights are violated. Women and girls are restricted in their access to education, health care facilities and employment. Poor health condition and malnutrition made pregnancy and childbirth exceptionally dangerous for the Afghan women. The Taliban policies also severely limited women's mobility in May 2001, a decree was issued by the Taliban, banning women from driving car which further limited their activities.

This novel is a good example of literary work which can convince women to understand their rights and believe in their ability to stand against the segregation. The stories about gender discrimination are portrayed through the three female characters of the novel, viz. Nana, Mariam and Laila who live in patriarchal society. In this kind of society if a girl is born in a family, it is considered a bad luck and as burden on the family. Hosseini has tried to shed some light on the fact that women are suffering from the discrimination, based on gender and that women have their own choice either to stay and bear this or fight against it. Through the female characters of the novel the author shows the treatment meted out to Afghan women in their homes. They are treated as an object, being protected in childhood by her father, in youth by her husband and when her husband is dead by her son. This novel, which is like his first novel also set in the background of Afghanistan from the early 1960s to the early 2000, deals with the lives of the three Afghan women who belong to different generations, dwell in different places but suffering from the same agony. The novel is divided into four parts and it deals with the relationship between mother and daughter and friendship between women. The focus of the first part is on Nana and Mariam,

Gender Discrimination and Segregation in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns* continuing with Laila in second part, the relationship between Mariam and Laila in third part and Laila's life with his beloved ones in the final part. The novel begins with word 'harami' which means 'bastard', 'illegitimate' and this word encompasses the stigmatic existence of the lives of Mariam and Laila :

Mariam was five years old the first time she
heard the word *harami*(Hosseini 2008:3)

Mariam is delineated as an outcast who is a reason of disappointment and shame to her mother whom she renders as a social outcast. Nana considered to be the guilty of that crime which she had not been part of, in fact, she was victim of that. On the other hand, Mariam's father Jalil who was the actual culprit, enjoyed the full-fledged benefits of an extravagant life which is full of honour and respect. Nana is thrown of the periphery of normal living to deliver the child all alone and she quietly accepts the accusations made at her. She often blurts out:

He betrayed us, your beloved father. He cast us
out. He cast us out of his big fancy house like we
were nothing to him. He did it happily. (5)

Damaged by a powerful person in the territory where there is no hope for justice, Nana doesn't want her daughter to bear a similar rejection which she has endured:

This is what it means to be woman in the world...
learn it. Now and learn it well... a man's accusing
finger always finds the happiness you never had.
And you don't want a good life for me. You are
one with the wretched heart.(27)

Rejection, abandonment, unhappiness, hatred, frustration, depression fill her life. Nana has not only been segregated by Jalil and his wives but also by her own father who fail to understand her agony and struggle. Eventually this situation affects her physically, emotionally, economically, socially and lead her to a tragic end.

A Thousand Splendid Suns is a narrative that shows the plight of women who suffer from gender discrimination in a strong patriarchal society of Afghanistan. Brutality against women is the most obvious form of gender discrimination such as raping, punching, slapping, kicking etc. and it leaves negative impact on the victims. In the first chapter, the female character named Nana becomes more vulnerable to rape. On the contrary, Jalil's position as an honourable man in patriarchal society has more power than women, and as Nana's employer, triggers him to rape Nana. She has to bear

disgrace throughout her life, consequently she gets pregnant and gives birth to a girl child who was later labelled as bastard, *harami*, who is later on abandoned by her own father, Jalil. In the subsequent parts of the novel the other female characters Mariam and Laila experience marital rape and went through same physical-mental trauma. Laila had not only been trapped by Mariam's husband but also destined by the circumstances created by him to get married. Their husband Rasheed, always forces his sexual desire on these women irrespective of their psychological state. When Rasheed gets married to Laila, Mariam breathes a sigh of relief :

But it was inevitable that they would run into each other. Mariam passed the girl on the stairs, in the narrow hallway, in the kitchen, or by the door as she was coming in from the yard. When they met like this, an awkward tension rushed into the space between them. The girl gathered her skirt and breathed out a word or two of apology, and, as she hurried past, Mariam would chance a sidelong glance and catch a blush. Sometimes she could smell Rasheed on her. She could smell his sweat on the girl's skin, his tobacco, his appetite. Sex, mercifully, was a closed chapter in her own life. It had been for some time, and now even the thought of those laborious sessions of lying beneath Rasheed made Mariam queasy in the gut.

(215-16)

Psychological violence is often more torturous and frustrating as it always targets the dignity of the sufferer. The protagonists Laila and Mariam go through constant threatening, mocking at the hands of antagonist, Rasheed. The following lines from *A Thousand Splendid Suns* gives us a clear picture of psychological suffering of the females of the novel in particular and the entire Afghan women in general in a typical conservative Afghan society:

It wasn't easy tolerating him talking this way to her, to bear his scorn, his ridicule, his insults, his walking past her life she was nothing but a house cat. But after four years of marriage, Mariam saw clearly how much a woman could tolerate when she was afraid. And Mariam was afraid. She lived in fear of his shifting moods, his volatile temperament, his insistence on steering even mundane exchanges down a confrontational path that, on occasion, he would resolve with punches, slaps, kicks, and sometimes try to make amends for

Gender Discrimination and Segregation in Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*
with polluted apologies and sometimes not.
(97-98)

As the story of the novel progresses we witness the female leads going through anxiety and fear. Insult, mocking and threats become a part of their household life. Rasheed from the very beginning represents the cruel force of conventional male dominating community. Many of his actions such as finding faults in his wives, making fun of their behavioural patterns and insulting them are seen as normal not only by the society but by the victim also. Both the protagonists of the novel often experience physical violence not only at the hands of their husband, Rasheed, but by the society as a whole. Mariam was forced to chew pebbles when her cooking of rice failed to meet his expectations. Being forced to chew those pebbles, Mariam's mouth bleeds and breaks her two molars. Same is the case with Laila too. She also suffers from terrible physical injuries on her lips, tongue and mouth. Laila was not only targeted by Rasheed but by Taliban too, due to her confident and independent nature. She has been beaten by a young Talib for not having a mahram or male relative with her while she travels :

One day, a young Talib beat Laila with a radio antenna. When he was done, he gave a final whack to the back of her neck and said, "I see you again, I'll beat you until your mother's milk leaks out of your bones. (Hosseini, 313)

The concept of male domination and placing women in the inferior position is the strong feature of patriarchal system. Men always emphasise the importance of their reputations and to protect their 'namoos' or reputation can do whatever they want without considering women's feelings and desires. In *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, when Jalil knows about the pregnancy of Nana he tries his best to keep his reputation to avoid any shame without even considering her to be a human being who has her own values. He victimised the victim of his rape by abandoning her, not marrying her and not admitting his daughter as his legal child. Women have always been treated as slaves in every part of the globe; it doesn't matter from what community and creed or class-system they belong to. They cannot take important decision of their lives like marriage because of the fact that the more powerful people have arranged it for them. Mariam and Laila are the two of many Afghan women in the novel who are pressurised to get married with unwanted suitor, who are elder to them. These circumstances show how unimportant their lives in the society are. They had to put up with the pressure of giving birth to male child as boy child was preferred over a girl child due to age-old beliefs like girls were considered as liability and burden whereas boys were thought to be the earning members of the family as well as name bearers of their clan. Rasheed shows different treatment to both of his children—Aziza and Zalmai. His behaviour

shows how valueless a girl is. This preference for sons continues to devalue women and prohibit the view of woman as equals throughout the society. The women of Afghanistan are excluded from health facilities such as hospital and clinics. Sick women cannot see the doctors and take medication. They are also deprived of the fundamental rights such as medication, liberty of mobility, education etc. The schools were closed on their faces. They had been severely beaten up by the Taliban for obtaining education. Many school going girls like Giti, who was a classmate and friend of Laila, lost their lives in a bomb blast while they were on the way to school or vice versa.

In the light of the analysis of Khaled Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*, one may conclude that the prolonged conditions of conflict and war in Afghanistan has brought adverse impact on its women folk by intensifying the patriarchal oppressions on them. As a result, they had to undergo inexpressible agony and suffering which in Hosseini's own words, "has been matched by very few groups in recent world history". This agony and suffering was cast in their voicelessness. Through his narrative Hosseini endeavours to provide voice to Afghan women by bringing their suffering to fore. This novel contains the story of mass killing, war, revenge, sexuality and violence. Fighting powerfully against Rasheed, Mariam and Laila have successfully freed themselves and provided better future for the next generation by using education as their weapon. There are so many factors that influenced their lives, but still they strongly stand against the discrimination and segregation they had faced and eventually overcome the obstacles by their will power.

Anam Jabeen

Research Scholar

P.G. Department of English and Research Centre

Magadh University, Bodh-Gaya

Works Cited

Bhasin, Kamla and Nighat Said Khan. *Some Questions on the Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia*. New Delhi : Sarup & Sons, 1999.

Hosseini, Khaled. *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. London : Bloomsbury, 2008.